

# PATIENT EDUCATION



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE PHYSICIANS

## Your First Period

**P**uberty is a time when your body begins to change to become more like an adult's. Starting your menstrual period is one of these changes. Getting your first period means that you are growing up and becoming a young woman. You may be looking forward to getting your first period, or you may feel like these changes are happening before you are ready for them. Knowing about the changes in your body can help you feel healthy and more in control.

This pamphlet explains

- what happens during your menstrual cycle
- how to use personal care products
- what to do if you have problems with your period

### The Menstrual Cycle

When puberty begins, your brain signals your body to produce **hormones**. Some of these hormones prepare your body each month for a possible pregnancy. This is called the menstrual cycle. Hormones cause the lining of the **uterus** to become thicker with extra blood and tissue. One of your **ovaries** then releases an **egg**. This is called **ovulation**. The egg moves down one of the two **fallopian tubes** toward the uterus.

If the egg is not fertilized with a man's **sperm**, pregnancy does not occur. The lining of the uterus breaks down and flows out of the body through the **vagina**. The release of blood and tissue from the lining of your uterus is your menstrual period (also called "your period").

### When Periods Start

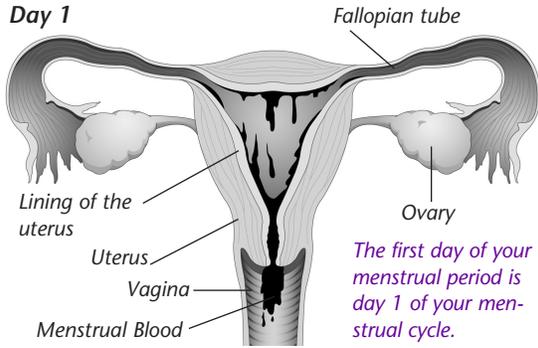
The hormones made during puberty cause many changes in your body. You get taller, you grow hair under your arms and on your **vulva**, and your breasts grow. Your period usually starts about 2–3 years after your breasts start to grow. Most girls start their periods between the ages of 12 years and 13 years, but some start earlier or later.

### How Long Periods Last

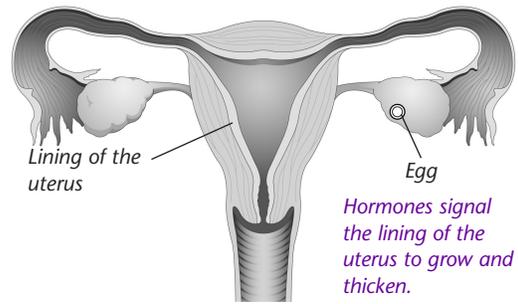
When you first start menstruating, your periods may last only a few days. Your first few periods may be very light. You may only see a few spots of reddish brown blood. Anywhere from 2 to 7 days is normal. If your period lasts for more than 7 days, you should see your health care provider.

## The Menstrual Cycle

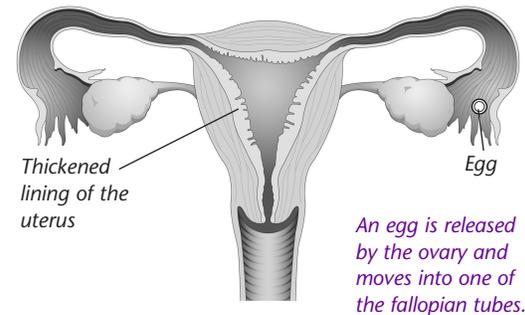
Day 1



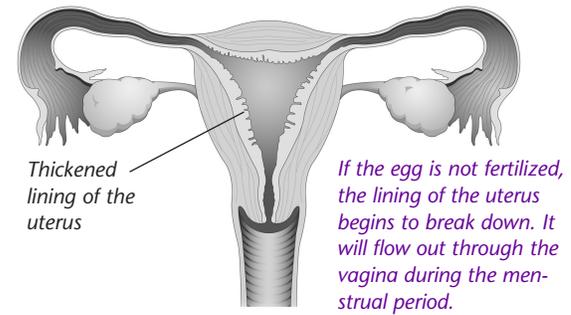
Day 5



Day 14



Day 28



### Keeping Track

A menstrual cycle is counted from the first day of bleeding in one month to the first day of bleeding in the next month. The average menstrual cycle is about 28 days, but cycles that are 21–45 days also are normal. It may take 6 years or more after your period starts for your cycle to get regular.

It is a good idea to track your menstrual cycle on a calendar. If you do this every month, you may notice a pattern. It may become easier to tell when you will get your next period. Check online or on your smart phone for apps that can help you track your period.

To track your period on a calendar, mark the first day your bleeding starts on a calendar with an “X.” Put an X on each of the following days that you have bleeding. Count the first “X” as day 1. Keep counting the days until you have your next period.

### How to Use Personal Care Products

Pads are used to soak up the menstrual flow. Tampons and menstrual cups catch the flow from inside your vagina. Pads, tampons, and menstrual cups can be used at different times. Some also can be used together. Some girls use tampons or cups on heavy-flow days with a pad for extra protection. Some use pads on lighter days. Some girls like to wear tampons during the day and pads at night.

There are different types of pads, tampons, and menstrual cups available. Knowing how these personal care products work may help you pick the ones that

are right for you. Many girls have questions about how to deal with their periods. You can find answers to some of these questions in the box “Common Questions About Menstrual Periods.”

### Pads

Pads are worn inside your underwear to collect your menstrual flow. They come in different sizes, styles, and thicknesses. Some have extra material on the sides called “wings” that fold over the edges of your underwear to help keep the pad in place and give better protection. A thinner, shorter version of a pad is a “panty liner.” Some girls wear panty liners on the last days of their periods when the flow is light or on days when they think their period will come.

### Keeping Track of Your Period

JANUARY						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

A calendar can help you keep track of your period.

## Common Questions About Menstrual Periods

### Will everyone be able to tell when I am having my period?

Not unless you tell them. Today's pads are comfortable and thin. It is impossible to tell that a pad is being worn. Tampons and menstrual cups are worn inside the vagina and cannot be seen through clothing.

### Will I have to miss gym class or take things easy when I am having my period?

You can live a normal life when you are having your period. In fact, exercise can help relieve cramps and give you energy. You might experience some cramping or feel a little bit more tired than usual, but it should not be enough to put you on the sidelines. If you have a lot of pain that keeps you from your normal activities, see your doctor.

### It seems like I am losing an awful lot of blood. Should I worry?

Chances are, what looks like a lot of blood to you is not really a lot of blood. During an average period, you will lose only 4–12 teaspoons of menstrual fluid. But it might look like a lot more when you see it on your pad. If you are soaking through a pad or tampon every 1–2 hours, this may be a sign of a problem. If you truly feel you are losing a great deal of blood, talk to your health care provider. He or she will tell you whether it is normal or not, and what to do.

### How will I know when my period is about to start?

If you are keeping track on a calendar, and if your periods are regular, you should be able to tell each month about when your period will begin. If your periods are not regular, you might still have some signs. Some girls begin to feel mild cramps right before their periods begin. Others might feel bloated or have other symptoms. Sometimes, though, your period can catch you by surprise. It is good to be prepared. Always carry an extra pad or tampon, just in case.

### Can tampons be worn while swimming?

Yes. Tampons do not interfere with physical exercise, including swimming. You should change your tampon after swimming because it can become waterlogged.

### What should I do if I feel uncomfortable or have pain while using or after using tampons?

You may want to try using a smaller sized tampon. Tampons with plastic applicators may be easier to insert. If you feel pain, see your doctor.

### What do I do if I cannot find the tampon string or if a tampon gets stuck?

Try to locate the string with your fingers. Squatting may make it easier to reach the tampon. If you cannot find the string or the tampon will not come out, see your doctor. A tampon cannot get lost inside your body. The opening to the uterus is too small for a tampon to pass through.

Choose a pad based on your body size, the amount of flow, and what feels comfortable. Pads with deodorant may irritate your skin.

Change your pad at least every 4–8 hours or whenever it seems full or feels wet and uncomfortable. Some girls change their pads each time they urinate.

## Tampons

Tampons absorb menstrual blood from inside the vagina. Some tampons have a plastic or cardboard applicator tube that helps slide the tampon in place. Some tampons do not have applicators and are inserted with just your fingers. A short string attached to the end of the tampon hangs out of your vagina to help you remove it later.

Many girls choose tampons because they can be worn while swimming and are more comfortable, especially during exercising or playing sports. Follow the directions inside the box to learn how to insert a tampon. It should be comfortable to wear. Once it is inserted correctly, you should not feel it.

Just like pads, tampons come in different sizes for heavier and lighter periods. The tampon package will tell you how much fluid it will absorb. A “super” tampon, for example, is thicker and is meant for heavy flow. A “slim” or “junior” tampon is slender and is meant for lighter flow. When you are learning to use tampons, the smaller ones may be easier to try first.

You should change your tampon at least every 4–8 hours. Leaving a tampon in for a long time has been linked to **toxic shock syndrome** (see the box “What You Should Know About Toxic Shock Syndrome”). When your flow is heavier, you may need to change it more often.

## Menstrual Cups

Menstrual cups are made of plastic or rubber. They are inserted into the vagina to catch the menstrual flow. You remove and empty the cup every 8–12 hours.

Menstrual cups can be bought in stores or online. Some cups are used only once and thrown away. Others can be washed and reused. It may take some practice to use a menstrual cup—often a few menstrual periods are needed to get used to it. There may be less of a risk of getting toxic shock syndrome with menstrual cups compared with tampons.

## Dealing With Period Pain

Some girls have a cramping pain in the lower abdomen or back or breast tenderness just before and during their periods. Some girls get

headaches or feel dizzy. Some get nausea or diarrhea. To help ease cramps, you can try the following:

- Take ibuprofen or naproxen sodium (if you do not have an allergy to aspirin or severe asthma). Always follow the directions on the bottle about how much to take.
- Exercise.
- Place a heating pad, heat wrap, or other source of heat on your abdomen or lower back.

If these problems do not go away after treatment or if you cannot go to school or do your normal activities, you should talk to your doctor.

### Possible Problems With Bleeding

Periods are a normal part of life, but sometimes there are problems. Talk to a parent or your doctor if you have any of the following problems.

#### **Amenorrhea**

**Amenorrhea** means not having a period. It is normal for some girls not to start their periods until age 16 years. But you should see your doctor if you have not started your period by age 15 years. You also should see your doctor if you have started your period but it then stops for more than 3 months. There are many reasons why your period could stop or not start at all. They include the following:

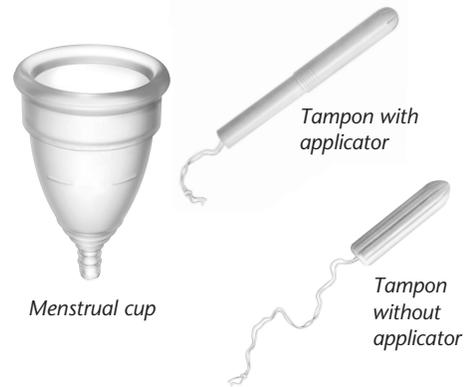
- Sudden change in weight
- Illness
- Stress
- Extreme exercise (such as running long distances each day)
- Hormone problems
- Taking certain medicines
- Pregnancy

### What You Should Know About Toxic Shock Syndrome

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS) is a rare but serious illness. It is caused by an infection. Leaving a tampon in your vagina too long—more than 8 hours—has been linked to TSS. It is important to read all of the instructions inside the tampon package to learn about this condition. Use tampons with the lowest absorbency needed to absorb your flow. Do not use tampons when you do not have your period.

When using tampons, be alert to the symptoms of TSS: fever, a rash that looks like a sunburn (especially on the hands or feet), or diarrhea. Call your doctor right away if you have these symptoms.

### Menstrual Cup and Tampons



*The menstrual cup is inserted into the vagina and catches the menstrual flow before it leaves the body. Tampons are inserted into the vagina to absorb the menstrual flow.*

Your doctor may ask questions or do tests to find out the cause of your amenorrhea. If you have had sex and you have missed your period, you should have a pregnancy test.

#### **Heavy Bleeding**

If you are bleeding so much that you need to change your pad or tampon every 1–2 hours or if your period lasts for more than 7 days, you should see your doctor. See your doctor right away if you are light-headed, dizzy, or have a racing pulse. There may be a medical reason why your period is so heavy. In many cases, heavy bleeding can be treated.

#### **Irregular Periods**

You should tell your doctor if your periods are usually regular but then become irregular for several months. You also should see your doctor if your period comes more often than every 21 days or less often than every 45 days.

#### **Finally...**

Menstrual periods are a normal, healthy part of a woman's life. They are part of the process that allows you to have children when the time is right for you. Having a period should not interfere with your daily activities. If you have any questions or concerns about your period, talk them over with your parent or doctor.

## Glossary

**Amenorrhea:** The absence of menstrual periods in women of reproductive age.

**Egg:** The female reproductive cell made in and released from the ovaries. Also called the ovum.

**Fallopian Tubes:** Tubes through which an egg travels from the ovary to the uterus.

**Hormones:** Substances made in the body that control the function of cells or organs.

**Ovaries:** Organs in women that contain the eggs necessary to get pregnant and make important hormones, such as estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone.

**Ovulation:** The time when an ovary releases an egg.

**Puberty:** The stage of life when the reproductive organs start to function and other sex features develop. For women, this is the time when menstrual periods start and the breasts develop.

**Sperm:** A cell made in the male testes that can fertilize a female egg.

**Toxic Shock Syndrome:** A severe illness caused by a bacterial infection. It can be caused by leaving a tampon in the vagina too long.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ in the female pelvis. During pregnancy, this organ holds and nourishes the fetus.

**Vagina:** A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles. The vagina leads from the uterus to the outside of the body.

**Vulva:** The external female genital area.

This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) to ensure accuracy.

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